

THEATER

Broadway on the Bowery

DAMES AT SEA is a 1930s success story wrapped inside a 1960s success story. Seven years ago this delicious parody of the singing, dancing gee-whiz Hollywood musical of the Busby Berkeley era opened at the off-off-Broadway *Caffé Cino*. And there it died. But, in the spirit of those old films, the talented kids who had their hearts set on the big time didn't quit. Book and lyric writers George Haimsohn and Robin Miller and Jim Wise, who wrote the bright score, found their angel and a theater. It wasn't much of a theater, just the little *Bouwerie Lane*, perched on the edge of New York's Skid Row. But on opening night,



Lee Owens—Patrick Owens

'Dames': Neon in their eyes

the six young talented dancers and singers hoofed their feet off and sang their hearts out. And, overnight, "*Dames at Sea*" has become the biggest non-Broadway hit of the season.

The backers jacked the tickets up to a \$10 top. Broadway moguls, including emissaries of David Merrick, went slumming down to the *Bouwerie Lane* with an eye to moving the show uptown. But did those talented kids yield to the pressures and corrupting lure of the Great White Way? No sir! They decided to keep their little old show running in the homey little theater where it was born. And there it stays, regaling its nightly sellout audience of 189 with the sharpest, most stylish satirical nostalgia since "*The Boy Friend*."

Director and choreographer Neal Kenyon duplicates the bubbly, milkshake innocence of the old Ruby Keeler-Dick

Powell sagas with the savvy and love of someone whose memory is a cluttered warehouse of kicky chorus lines, crooning sweethearts and testy stage managers. Bernadette Peters has the wide-eyed naïveté of a retarded cupid as she stumbles into Greater Gotham from the sticks with neon in her eyes, announcing: "I just got off the bus and I want to be in a Broadway show." You know the rest: a spot in the chorus, endless hours of tap-dance practice, love with a young songwriter, the show threatened by creditors, the star seized with sickness, the big chance and stardom!

The entire cast creates sharp and affectionate caricatures of all the gosh 'n' gollies and moony stares and instant tears and pouts that were the hallmarks of Berkeley's artfully naïve nonsense. Kenyon, working shoestring miracles, makes his six performers seem like a chorus line of hundreds in Berkeley-ish production galas like "*Good Times Are Here to Stay*" and "*Raining in My Heart*" which set transparent umbrellas opening and closing like a clockwork garden of artificial flowers. And the skimpy, sequined costumes of Peter Harvey and the villainous vamping of raven-haired Tamara Long evoke the underlay of eroticism beneath the apple-pie crust.

—PAUL D. ZIMMERMAN